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# RESEARCH UPDATE

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## Youth Violence and Alcohol/Drug Abuse

Youth violence continues to be a significant problem in the United States. In a recent report, The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) estimates that law enforcement agencies across the United States made 2.11 million arrests of individuals younger than 18 years of age. Of these 2.11 million arrests, 56,000 were for aggravated assault, 231,700 were for other types of assault, and 3,340 were for sexual assault. In 2008, juveniles accounted for 16% of all violent crime arrests and 11% of all murder victims in the US were under age 18<sup>1</sup>.

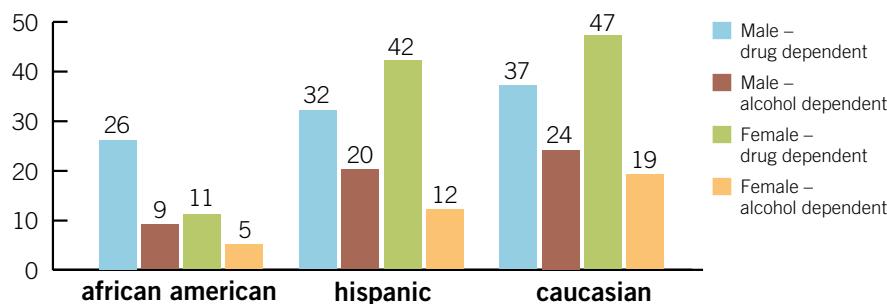
The FBI routinely assesses trends in violent crimes committed by young people. Data on the occurrence of murder/homicide, manslaughter, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault are compiled into a statistic representing the "violent crime index." The juvenile violent crime index (as indexed by the number of arrests per 100,000 juveniles) increased dramatically from 1988 to 1994, and then decreased from 1994 to 2004. However, more recent data from 2005 to 2008 indicate that the index is again on the increase<sup>1</sup>.

### The relationship between youth violence and substance abuse

Youth violence and substance abuse often occur together. The Pathways to Desistance study is an OJJDP-sponsored study that followed over 1,300 serious juvenile offenders from Philadelphia and Phoenix for a period of seven years after their conviction. Youth participating in the study were 14 to 17 years old at the time of their conviction and had been convicted of at least one serious crime involving violence, offense against property, or drugs. The sample was 84% male and 80 percent minority and over 40% were convicted of felony crimes against persons (such as murder, sexual assault, and robbery). Participants were extensively interviewed at the beginning of the study as well as several times during the seven years after enrollment in the study.

The overall purpose of the study was to increase understanding of the factors that contribute to offenders either desisting from or continuing to engage in criminal activity. One key finding to emerge is that serious/chronic offenders were much more likely than other offenders to meet diagnostic criteria for a substance use disorder. The following graph, adapted from a 2010 report by the OJJDP, shows these data as a function of ethnic group<sup>2</sup>:

**Percent of Pathways study participants with a substance use disorder at baseline**



SOURCE: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2010.

### THE HAZELDEN EXPERIENCE

Published by Hazelden, the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP) is the most researched and best-known bullying prevention program available today. It is a whole-school program that has been proven to prevent or reduce bullying within school settings<sup>3,4</sup>. When implemented with fidelity, schools have reported reductions of 50% or more in bullying incidents. This SAMHSA Model Program and Blueprints Model Program are being implemented throughout the United States, and in numerous countries around the world.

Hazelden's Center for Youth and Families offers a number of treatment programs to young people with substance use disorders. Upon admission, patients are asked a number of questions about legal involvement during the period prior to admission. The Butler Center for Research examined a group of adolescent males recently discharged from residential treatment. Over 55% of these patients reported being arrested at least once in the year prior to treatment and over 40% reported spending at least one day in jail. These data suggest a relationship between problematic substance use and criminal behavior.

### HOW TO USE THIS INFORMATION

- **Parents:** If your teenager is having difficulties with substance abuse and violent behavior, remember that substance abuse treatment can help. The longer your teen is engaged in treatment, the better the outcome in reducing violent behavior and substance abuse.
- **Educators:** Support the implementation of effective, empirically-based violence and substance abuse prevention programs in your school.
- **Treatment Providers:** Work to keep young people engaged in the alcohol/drug treatment process. Longer treatment stays and using structured skills-based approaches effectively reduce violence among youth.

Another finding to emerge from the Pathways study is that substance use and criminal behavior appear to be associated with one another over time, though there is no conclusive evidence that the two things are causally related. Because the study was longitudinal and involved several different measurement points for each individual, researchers were able to perform a data analytic technique called structural equation modeling (SEM). SEM is used to determine whether increases in substance use at one point in time predict increased criminal behavior at a later point in time (or vice versa). Though SEM is not sufficient enough to determine a causal relationship, it does allow one to determine exactly how two variables correlate with one another over time. The SEM analysis of the Pathways study showed a consistent reciprocal relationship between substance use and violent offending over time; as one increased the other increased as well.

### School bullying and substance use/abuse

Bullying is another type of violence that sometimes occurs between young people, and this topic has received a great deal of recent media attention. A 2009 study by Tharp-Taylor and colleagues showed a relationship between middle school bullying and substance use. The study sample was comprised of 926 ethnically diverse sixth to eighth grade students. Youth who were victims of mental (such as name calling and threats) or physical (such as hitting, kicking, or other bodily contact) bullying were significantly more likely to use alcohol, smoke cigarettes, smoke marijuana, or use inhalants. Importantly, this relationship continued to hold even when the statistical analyses controlled for gender, grade level, ethnicity, and past substance use<sup>3</sup>.

Another study examined a large sample of tenth graders who participated in the 2005/2006 Health Behaviors in School-aged Children U. S. Survey. Study participants were asked a number of questions assessing both alcohol and cigarette use over the past 30 days. They were also asked questions about victimization by peers and whether or not they were experiencing symptoms of depression. Predictive model analyses of the data revealed a number of interesting findings. Females who reported being bullied were more depressed and more likely to use alcohol and cigarettes than females who had not been bullied, and analyses indicated that depression mediated (was responsible for) the relationship between victimization and substance use. Among male participants, bullying was associated with depressive symptoms but not with substance use<sup>4</sup>. Taken together, the findings from these studies suggest that being the victim of bullying may put young people at risk for problematic substance use.

### Summary

Though youth violence has for the most part decreased in recent years, an alarming number of young people are involved in violent crimes each year, as either a victim or perpetrator. A great deal of evidence suggests a relationship between violence and substance use, indicating that successfully addressing substance use in young people may have a positive impact on violent behaviors as well.

### References

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The Butler Center for Research is dedicated to improving recovery from addiction by conducting clinical and institutional research, collaborating with other research centers, and communicating scientific findings.

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